

**Thornton High School  
Spring 2009 Commencement Address  
May 20, 2009**

**By Governor Bill Ritter, Jr.**

Thanks Cody. I promise you he didn't write that introduction. Cody did that and his introduction slightly longer than my graduation speech. I really appreciate the introduction and I want to comment on the people we have seen today. How many of you think that someday you will buy a CD that Andrea has sung on and produced? I do a lot where the Star Spangled Banner is sung and that may be the single best rendition I have ever heard.

I want to make mention of Mario. Here is an 11-year-old kid who comes to this state not speaking a single word of English. Today he is on the platform as your representative. Mario is what I would call the exclamation mark of the American dream.

As Cody said in the introduction, I am a father of four kids. I have a son graduating from high school on Sunday. I have one son out of college, one in college, one graduating from high school and a daughter who's a sophomore. So I know a little but about the situation your families are in today. They are absolutely bursting with pride that you made this, absolutely bursting with pride that you are sitting here today. You know and I know that sitting in those seats was very much a team effort in your family and I want you to stand and acknowledge with a round of applause all of your family members that were a part of a team that helped you get to this point today.

Stay standing. There is another part of that team that is sitting behind you. They are the faculty and staff of Thornton High School who have labored to ensure that you have made it.

Now you can have a seat. So I don't do many high school speeches as governor. The only high school speech I am doing this year is yours. That is not to flatter me, that is to flatter you. There is a reason; we didn't just pull names out of a hat. We looked at schools where there was a dramatic difference made by the students, with the urging from the faculty, with the urging of your principle Janet Walters; you as a class embraced excellence.

You embraced it not for just some of the kids; you embraced excellence for all kids. You believed all kids that in their way could be excellent. So now give yourselves a round of applause because you, yourselves embraced excellence.

I just want to make mention of your superintendent, Mike. Did you know that this is the fifth largest school district in this state? Mike was one of the people I spoke with during my campaign because I believed he has courageously embraced reform in education and student centered reform.

And now we are going to have a little biology lesson. You thought you were done with school, right? I know a lot of you; actually I think all of you had to take biology so you probably learned about the bone structure. But I think what the biology teacher did not tell you were the three bones that you have to remember going forward.

The first of those bones is the wishbone. The wishbone because it is symbolic of dreamery. We have talked about on the stage how you dream, and I encourage you as graduating seniors to lay out the wishbone and say, "what are my dreams, what do I really want to do, where do I want to

go?” And let me tell you what you decide doesn’t have to be static; it doesn’t have to be what you want to for the rest of your life. Never stop dreaming because then you’ll stop moving.

It really is true. I was one out of 12 kids, I was the sixth, and my parents didn’t go to college. But I dreamed about college as a kid, so I worked construction, had some scholarships and paid my way through college. And then I had a dream to go to law school, and I hadn’t thought about being a lawyer as a child. We had no lawyer in the family, but I dreamed about it and I was able to be a lawyer and then I became a criminal prosecutor and I practiced law for five years. But my wife and I had always wanted to help serve other people in the Third World, and so we moved to Africa for three years after I practiced law for five years. We sold everything we had, and for three years we lived as Catholic missionaries in Africa because we had dreams of doing it.

While I was there I dreamed of being in elective office, and when I got back I became the Denver District Attorney. And while I there I dreamed about the next thing I wanted to do, and it was to be governor. I never as a high school student imagined that someday I would be governor. But what I did was keep dreaming about it. My wishbone really has helped me day to day to day get to the place where dreams come true. Your dreams come true. And in my life, I pointed out that American dream as we talked about is a person who comes from a place and someday is going to be the speaker of his graduating class.

The second bone, is the funny bone, and this is really important. You can’t ever quit laughing and taking things lightly that should be taken lightly. Don’t forget yourself, you will make mistakes. It is not false modesty and it is about humility. We aren’t bigger than the world around us. We get there because we have a sense of humor.

The final bone is the backbone. The backbone is symbolic of the courage it would take to live you life in a meaningful way. I promise you, if you challenge yourself, then you will be challenged by decisions that are difficult to make, by risks that you will need to take, decisions that will go to your core and ask you what you are made of. What are you made of? And here you have the ability to choose right from wrong and I promise you it takes courage to do the right thing, to do the difficult thing and do the risky thing in terms from that which is safe. The meaning of life is about being involved in things that are bigger than us, but I promise you, you will get there by doing the difficult thing.

Mark Twain said, “Courage is not the absence of fear.” I know that high school seniors on their graduation day don’t feel much, just wait for your first test in college. High school students, high school seniors understand that courage is not the absence of fear; it is the mystery of fear. We all have fears; everybody in this audience and up here on this stage has fears. You master those fears and demonstrate the courage necessary to have a meaningful existence.

I am here today as Governor of the state to congratulate you on behalf of the state as a senior class because when you started here four years ago you said we will be about something and we will be about excellence. And today we are here to congratulate you for fulfilling and realizing that dream. God bless you.